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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAGHDAD 001618

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [IR](#) [IZ](#)  
SUBJECT: KURDISTAN REGIONAL GOVERNMENT'S MOST WANTED:  
MINISTER OF STATE FOR EXTERNAL AFFAIRS DISCUSSES AGENDA

Classified By: Political Counselor Robert S.  
Ford for Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

11. (C) SUMMARY: While waiting for a visa to the U.S. on May 11, newly-appointed Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Minister of State for External Relations Mohammad Ihsan outlined his policy agenda for his term. As the current personal advisor to Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani and the former KRG-Erbil Minister for Human Rights, Ihsan will need all his previous government experience in what many view as the most controversial ministry in the KRG. While Ihsan promised to work closely with the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he laid out an agenda for his term that plotted a crash course with Baghdad: restoration of "lost Kurdish property" (Kirkuk), developing bilateral relationships with border states like Turkey and Iran, and Kurdish representation in Iraqi Embassies abroad. Although Ihsan said all the right things (including, at the end of the conversation, "Kurds realize that their only hope is through the success of a unified Iraq.") much of Ihsan's smooth delivery failed to mask the fact that the Kurds have begun taking what many here --Kurds and Arabs -- perceive to be small steps toward independence. We must encourage the KRG to coordinate the KRG ministry's actions with the Iraqi MFA, and route all bilateral issues through Baghdad. END SUMMARY

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Introducing a Controversial Minister  
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12. (C) In between waiting for a visa to the U.S. on May 11, newly-appointed Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Minister of State for External Relations Mohammad Ihsan outlined his policy agenda for his term. Ihsan, who speaks perfect British English, has lived in Kirkuk and Zakho City. In addition to his duties as a KRG minister, Ihsan said, he is expected to continue in his full-time position as Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani's international affairs adviser, legal adviser, and protocol officer. According to Ihsan, he oversees the legal affairs for all the Barzanis in London. He was also the former Minister of Human Rights for the KRG-Erbil. His experience in government service will no doubt come in handy as he takes on what many in Iraq are grumbling constitutes a "Foreign Ministry of Kurdistan."

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"We Plan to Work with the Iraqi MFA"  
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13. (C) Ihsan protested that the Ministry of State for External Affairs was not intended to challenge the central government Foreign Minister, currently led by fellow Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) member Hoshiyar Zebari. Instead, this Kurdish Ministry of State is to concentrate on internal issues. In order of importance, said Ihsan, the new Ministry would address issues of lost Kurdish territory, border issues with Turkey and Iran, and cultural/social issues of Kurds abroad. He intended to work closely with the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs to make sure that his ministry would not be contradicting Iraqi foreign policy. However, Ihsan added, Zebari is more of a hindrance, despite being Kurdish. According to Ihsan, Zebari has not insisted on Kurdish rights to representation in Iraqi Embassies abroad, and - on a more personal note - his ego makes it difficult for regional ministers to work with him.

14. (C) There is a big gap, Ihsan continued, between Iraqi embassies and party offices abroad. The Constitution allows for separate regional representation in Iraqi Embassies, Ihsan argued, but there was no evidence of this being put into practice. Iraq's neighbors are eagerly watching for fissures to exploit between the Iraqi Arabs and Kurds, but the Kurds in Iraq feel they have more in common with Arabs in Iraq than with Kurds in other countries.

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Lost Kurdish Territory?

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15. (C) Ihsan repeated Prime Minister Barzani's reference, made in the cabinet inauguration speech in Erbil on May 7, to the "lost Kurdish territories of Kirkuk, Khanaqin, Mandly, Sinjar, Zerkatya, and Shekhan. The Iraqi Government, he charged, should change the current provincial boundaries to reflect pre-Saddam meddling. This would benefit all of Iraq, not just the Kurds. Speaking of the Kurds, however, he mentioned that the issue of overcrowding in Ninewa, Diyala, Salah ad-Din, and Baghdad would be resolved if the Kurds were allowed to return to Kirkuk.

16. (C) Above all, Ihsan said flatly, restoring Kirkuk as part of Kurdistan is his primary goal. "The people of Kirkuk," he declaimed, "should have their rights restored on the grounds of humanity. I was a resident of Kirkuk and I was thrown out; how you will compensate me for the inability to return to my city for thirty years?" PolOff reiterated that the U.S. supported Constitution Article 140/TAL Article 58, but that neither article allowed for the forced removal of Arabization Arabs from Kirkuk. While Ihsan grudgingly concurred, he added that the Iraqi Property Claims Commission (IPCC) is notably corrupt and its staff willing to draw out this process indefinitely to maintain their jobs. He could not face the Kurdish people without resolving this issue - during the tenure of Ayad Allawi as Prime Minister, he and Communist Party Leader Hamid Majid Mousa served together on a committee to determine the proper dispensation of Kirkuk. This committee met only once, but even in that brief time he determined that the process was corrupt and bound to fail. Perhaps the answer is to reconstitute this committee and rethink the mechanisms for IPCC and the future of Kirkuk, he mused. (Comment: this committee is quite moribund even though Prime

Minister Jafari briefly pondered how to activate it.  
End Comment.)

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Iran, Turkey Border Issues  
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17. (C) As for regional neighbors like Turkey and Iran, Ihsan immediately concurred that bilateral relationships should be kept at the Baghdad level. However, the Kurds also needed to maintain their own ties to these countries - for example, the Kurds would need to maintain good business relations in order to export oil through Turkish territory. In the case of Turkey, Ihsan accused Turkish authorities of hypocrisy and being controlled by the hysterical outburst of Turkmen within Iraq. "I challenge you to find any public statement by a Kurdish leader commenting on internal problems within Turkey," Ihsan declared. "In contrast, Ankara is forever poking its nose into Iraqi affairs - why do they insist on commenting on Kirkuk?" Leaning closer, Ihsan dismissed Ankara, stating he could win an argument with them at any time by mentioning Konya. (Comment: According to Ihsan, as of 1985 Konya was widely acknowledged as a primarily Kurdish city; since then, the Turks have allegedly deported all the Kurds and "Turkified" the city.  
End Comment.)

18. (C) Ihsan said that Iran is trying to focus attention on the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and Kurdish issues to distract their domestic audience from the Iranian government's growing international problems. The so-called "attack" on PKK offices in Haj Omran was clearly a diversionary tactic, since the PKK had been warned well in advance, Ihsan claimed. Iran has supported the PKK with money, materials, political support, and hospitals, according to Ihsan. (Comment: During a meeting with PolCouns on May 10, senior Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) member Fuad Masum also alleged that over 90 percent of the PKK's support came from Iran.  
End Comment.)

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Comment  
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19. (C) Ihsan's casual comment in the beginning of the conversation that he is expected to be both the Prime Minister's personal assistant as well as the Minister of State for External Affairs raises more questions about the democratic structure of the KRG, and the tribal stranglehold the Barzanis have over their political sphere. Critics of the KRG may have some room for hope, however: if the Barzanis believe the Minister of State for External Relations job can be held as a "secondary career," it might indicate that they do not plan on tackling many issues through this venue. Its very existence, however, is a marker, with its brash declaration of independent authority from the center.

110. (C) Although Ihsan said all the right things (including at the end of the conversation, "Kurds realize that their only hope is through the success of a unified Iraq.") much of Ihsan's smooth delivery is not stopping many in Baghdad -- Kurds and Arabs - - from perceiving that the Kurds have begun taking small steps toward independence. From Prime Minister's Barzani's speech, where he called for self-reliance from Baghdad, to the very creation of what is clearly a Kurdish Foreign Minister, many

here perceive indications that as the KRG gains in strength the Kurds will retreat more and more from the daily political struggles of Arab Iraq. Rumors that the Iraqi Foreign Ministry portfolio may be split up, with a separate Iraqi Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, responsible for Arab countries, will only encourage the Kurds to pursue their own foreign policy. We must have to encourage the KRG to coordinate this KRG ministry's actions with the Iraqi MFA, and route all bilateral issues through Baghdad.

KHALILZAD